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The 'strange alteration' of *Hamlet*: comic books, adaptation and constructions of adolescent literacy¹

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This article examines two comic book adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* produced for teenage readers and used in school classrooms. It seeks to understand the ways in which particular kinds of literacy are being implied and constructed through the textual practice of multimodal adaptation. It presents a close reading of sections of the texts and places them within the framework of multimodal theory and adaptation studies. The paper is part of a larger study of comic book adaptations of Shakespeare's plays based on a series of semi-structured interviews with the producers (publishers, artists, textual editors) involved in the adaptation process. The data are analyzed in order to raise questions concerning the assumptions about literacy inherent in educational texts, and to outline the importance of further qualitative research in the area.

Keywords: comics and graphic novels, literacy, adaptation, multimodality, Shakespeare

Introduction

The use of adaptations, particularly of 'difficult' texts such as Shakespeare, is commonplace in school classrooms. It is often associated with the practices of English teachers trying to make historically remote texts more accessible and engaging to students. These practices are situated within wider educational debates about the changing 'literacies' of young people and the need for teachers and schools to account for these. This has most clearly been articulated in terms of new media and technologies that have changed not just what the younger generation 'know', but their 'ways of knowing' (Kress 2005; Ito *et al.* 2010; New London Group 1996). The view that literacy is multiple both in terms of the social and cultural contexts in which it is embedded *and* its modes, has led to arguments for educational content and processes to adapt accordingly (Barton and Hamilton 2000; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Jewitt and Kress 2003). Using films, comic books and other artifacts of children's 'popular culture' to teach traditional texts, historical narratives or scientific concepts, is one way in which schools and teachers have imagined they are addressing such gaps. The adapted text is an attempt to present knowledge and content in a medium in which young people are more 'literate.' The comics medium discussed in this paper, it has been argued, sits somewhere on the spectrum between print and digital culture. Still possessing the material features of a conventional book, comics also have the aesthetic

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appeal of a computer screen (Tabachnik 2010). ‘Comics literacy’ and ‘digital literacy’ have been seen as aligned, often possessed by the same individuals, and both involving more participatory forms of cultural interaction – conventions, fandom, online production (Gee 2007; Jenkins 1992, 2008; Putz 1999). Importantly, they employ a variety of ‘modes’ of communication, and hence operate on more than one level of ‘literacy,’ potentially providing a multi-layered pedagogical platform and different entry points for diverse students (Schwartz 2002). The assumptions that make problematic the movement of texts normally associated with out of school contexts into the space of the classroom have been well documented (Leander and Sheehy 2004; Moss 2000, 2001; Sabeti 2012a, 2012b). However, the text adapted *specifically for educational use* is an interesting case study because it attempts a hybrid of the two spaces and involves a set of assumptions about the relationship between them. Its physical existence makes those assumptions visible and material through the specific choices made in re-presenting the adapted text.

In the rest of this article I will look at an example of two comic book adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, produced and marketed for educational use, in order to highlight some of these assumptions. In particular, I am interested in the *kind of literate individual* being constructed through the textual practice of multimodal adaptation. While Shakespeare is adapted to the comic book form (and the comic book to Shakespeare), there is also a clear intention to adapt the young audience to Shakespeare. From an educational perspective, I am therefore interested in how the adapted text attempts *to adapt to its youthful readers and ensure that those readers adapt to Shakespeare*, rather than in how Shakespeare has been adapted *per se*. In beginning a discussion about the use of adapted texts and education, I hope to underline the importance of investigating this under-researched area further.

The case of *Hamlet* – data and methods

‘Adapt’: to adjust, to alter, to make suitable.

This paper is part of a larger study of the adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays into the comic book medium. The project seeks to understand the assumptions about young readers, and about ‘education’, which underlie the textual practice of adaptation. In this paper I present an analysis of two comic book adaptations of *Hamlet* and focus in some

depth on the rendering of the famous ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy. These readings are placed in the context of the publishers’ marketing strategies for the texts; I use evidence from their respective web sites, the book blurbs and other publicity outlets. I also use data collected through a series of ongoing semi-structured interviews with the artistic creators of the adaptations to shed light on the representational choices made. Where this is not available I have used the artist’s own reflections on the adaptation through a personal web log. I have chosen *Hamlet* as my case study because it is a play commonly taught in secondary schools in the U.K. and the U.S. where the two adaptations I consider were produced. It has a reputation for being one of Shakespeare’s more ‘difficult’ plays in terms of theme and structure and contains a number of soliloquies that deal with esoteric subjects. Yet, as the critic Harold Bloom has pointed out, *Hamlet* is one of the most ‘cited figures in Western consciousness’ (as cited in Desmet 1999, 23) and the play one of Shakespeare’s most adapted (Sanders 2006, 52) works, suggesting that *Hamlet* has an iconic status in what it means to be ‘literate’ in both Shakespeare and hence, Western culture. The ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy carries much of this iconic value, however, it is extremely abstract and potentially a challenge to adapt into the visual mode.

In the first instance, I establish what I have referred to earlier as the ‘educational’ intentions of both editions. After a discussion of the different approaches taken to adapting the whole text broadly, I then go on to look at the representational choices made in adapting the soliloquy in both versions. I focus on the following areas: the way in which the *text* of Shakespeare’s play is adapted; the genre of the comic medium chosen to carry the play’s text; the historical and temporal setting of the adapted versions; and finally, the ways in which both ideas and imagery are ‘translated’ into the visual mode. In my conclusion I return to the notion of ‘literacy,’ contrasting some of the straightforward assumptions made in the decision to produce and use these texts, with the complexities of the adaptation process itself. The questions of how and what teenagers might be literate in, or how other literacies might be developed, are complex ones. Adaptations into seemingly more accessible formats, I argue, may not always provide simple or straightforward solutions.

Theoretical Framing: Multimodality and Adaptation Studies

In discussing the data in this paper I use two theoretical frameworks: multimodal theory and adaptation studies. The theory of multimodality enables a nuanced and detailed study of the way in which Shakespeare has been moved across modes and how literacy is being constructed. It is helpful in highlighting the complexity of comics and provides a means of investigating the way in which modes interact to produce meaning. Adaptation theory provides an alternative way of viewing texts because of its concern with production and reception, the social and political context being particularly pertinent in the case of Shakespeare. Brought together, these different approaches are useful in unpacking assumptions made about audience, reception context and literacy.

The social semiotic theory of multimodality argues that ‘meanings are made (as well as distributed, interpreted and remade) through many representational and communicational resources, of which language is but one’ (Jewitt, 2008: 246). These resources, or ‘modes’, (language-as speech, photography, the drawn image etc.) are ‘meaning-making systems’ with particular affordances and constraints which are both culturally and medially determined. For example, the drawn image of a comic book can only do what the medium and materiality of pen on paper will allow, which is both more and less than the mode of written language contained in the speech bubble to its side. These affordances and constraints will also be culturally situated within the context of Western (or other) images and comic book conventions. Kress and van Leeuwen call the movement across modes – what we might refer to as adaptation – ‘transduction’ and suggest that different modal realizations have an effect on the student’s ‘perspective on knowledge’ (1996, 39). The employment of a variety of modes, or the presentation of content through different modes, may therefore provide the accessibility that a single mode cannot offer. Much of this work is based on the notion that communication is increasingly visual in nature (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Kress 2005) and there is a suggestion that images provide their readers with greater freedom. Images (and text/image combinations) are spatially organized, there is no ‘clearly discernible reading path’ and the reader is free to choose their own entry point and construct their own path through the message (2005, 9). The educational implications of this theory are potentially profound because, ‘If different modes enable different representational work to be done...then it follows that each mode must also require different “cognitive work” to be understood’ (2001, 26). This, multimodal theorists argue, is why we need to teach a meta-language for analyzing a variety of

modes so that students become ‘multi-literate.’ Critics have argued that while multimodal theorists nod to the context and culture in which signs are produced and read, the theory and its analytical framework remain formalist and largely text-based – a criticism I will return to at the end of this paper (Bazalgette and Buckingham 2013). What multimodal theory does not do, is help us to understand the *processes* through which texts, in this case *adapted* texts, come into being. Here some of the arguments put forward in recent theories of adaptation, in particular the work of Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders, are helpful.

Adaptation studies concerns itself with the ideologies and methodologies of the process of adapting one text into another. It seeks therefore to define and theorize adaptation as a process *and* a product, both in terms of how it is created and received (Sanders 2006, 20). It is interested in ‘what’ gets adapted, ‘how’ and ‘why’ and is therefore useful in exploring assumptions made about audience. Hutcheon sees adapted texts as culturally situated, networked entities involving ‘complex processes of filtration’. They should, she argues, be viewed as ‘intertextual webs or signifying fields, rather than simplistic one-way lines of influence from source to adaptation’ (2006, 24). While she discusses this network in terms of ‘texts’ or ‘intertexts’ here, elsewhere both Hutcheon and Sanders highlight the importance of the reception context to the choices made in the process of adaptation, particularly in terms of setting and style. Adaptations produced for younger readers (such as those considered here) aim to be what Gerard Genette has called ‘movements of proximation’ in that they attempt, through the medium of comics – and in some cases through temporal and cultural relocation of the setting– to move the text closer to the teenage audience’s frame of reference (1997, 304). In discussing the methodologies of adaptation, Hutcheon presents a categorization of what she terms ‘modes of engagement’ which she outlines as ‘telling’, ‘showing’ and ‘interacting’. ‘Telling,’ she argues, ‘requires of its audience conceptual work, whereas ‘showing’ calls on its perceptual decoding abilities. In the first, we imagine and visualize a world from black marks on white pages as we read; in the second, our imaginations are preempted as we perceive and then give meaning to a world of images, sounds and words seen and heard on the stage or screen’ (2006, 130). There are clearly many crossovers between these two theories: the distinction between ‘modes’ of one kind or another; the understanding of movements across modes as a recoding and altering of knowledge and engagement based on the communicator and the audience.

Two approaches to adapting *Hamlet*

The two comic book versions of *Hamlet* I consider here are those published by Self Made Hero as part of the *Manga Shakespeare* series in the U.K. in 2007, and the U.S. Spark Notes *No Fear Shakespeare* edition in 2008. *Manga Shakespeare* is a collaborative adaptation involving the publisher, the comic artists, a textual adapter and a textual editor; *No Fear Hamlet*, on the other hand, is the work of one individual who adapted the text and drew the images. The marketing and publicity of these respective companies implicitly and explicitly identifies young people as the important target audience. Both companies align their adapted texts with school curricula. Self Made Hero aims much of its publicity at teachers and schools. Their web site describes the series as, ‘A fusion of classic Shakespeare with manga visuals, these are cutting-edge adaptations that will intrigue and grip readers’. A dedicated *Manga Shakespeare* site stresses how ‘manga’ is used in Japan as ‘an instruction medium’ and how it is ‘popular with both girls and boys’ (<http://www.mangashakespeare.com/>). This discourse suggests that the text will make Shakespeare appealing, fit the educational requirements of schools and endow the teacher with some kudos too. The Spark Notes *No Fear Shakespeare* graphic novels are publicized with reference to the more established *No Fear Shakespeare* series that produce parallel modern English and Shakespearean text versions of the plays:

The original *No Fear* series made Shakespeare’s plays much easier to read, but these dynamic visual adaptations are impossible to put down. Each of the titles is illustrated in its own unique style, but all are distinctively offbeat, slightly funky, and appealing to teen readers.

(<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/hamlet-sparknotes-editors/1101968746>)

The assumption that the ‘cutting edge’ or ‘offbeat’ is what will strike a chord with teenage readers may have some truth in it, however, what is also interesting is that ‘youth’ seems to be considered as one homogenous audience. It is also assumed that this audience is a visually literate one; while the teachers may not be conversant with manga (indeed the Self Made Hero web site feels compelled to explain it to them), the pupils are. Emma Hayley, who initiated the series at Self Made Hero, has pointed to an increasingly visual culture as a motivating factor. ‘Children,’ she writes, ‘are growing up in a digital age and as such are far more visually literate than those of previous generations’; she goes on to identify her primary purpose as introducing the work of Shakespeare to teenagers or first-time readers, ‘via a medium they understood’ (2010,

268-9). Contrary to the visual and manga literacy of teenagers which is taken for granted, it is assumed that Shakespeare is opaque and it is not easy to become literate in it without some mediating aid. With this comes the understandable assumption that teachers *are* Shakespeare literate. So while both versions trade on the familiar notion of accessibility and youth appeal, they also attempt to make themselves credible with a ‘scholarly’ stamp. The covers of *No Fear Shakespeare* state that the series was created by Harvard students ‘for students everywhere’; *Manga Shakespeare* underlines the fact that their editorial team is ‘led by a leading Shakespeare scholar’.

(<http://www.mangashakespeare.com/>). Indeed, the ‘scholarliness’ of Shakespeare, which neither version dispenses with entirely, is dealt with in quite different ways.

Shakespeare’s ‘word’ or words?

The publishers take different approaches to the issue of the Shakespearean text: the *Manga Shakespeare* series keeps the original language but abbreviates the play script. *No Fear*, on the other hand, paraphrases Shakespeare’s language into a modern idiom, or as they describe it elsewhere in their publicity, ‘the kind of English people actually speak today’. There are different assumptions at play about the measures necessary to overcome the stumbling blocks between teenagers and Shakespeare. In taking a similar approach to Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film of *Romeo and Juliet*, Hayley at Self Made Hero decided to retain ‘the beauty of the language...combining visual poetry with textual poetry’ (2010, 269). The Shakespeare scholar who worked on the series and discussed his own role in the process, told me that the publisher’s ethos was to provide a text that was:

all Shakespeare, rather than paraphrased Shakespeare. So with the exception of a few explanatory stage directions at the beginning of a scene...everything that you read – or the eventual reader will read – is Shakespeare. It’s just that it’s been, as indeed happened in the original plays, cut. In this case brutally cut to the mere essence of the story.

It is assumed, therefore, that the reader is able to access this language with the aid of the images, as well as other visual devices such as placing some words in bold for emphasis and separating chunks of text into distinct speech bubbles. The textual editor and abbreviator of *Manga Shakespeare* told me, ‘the comic book doesn’t like lingering too long on text; it likes to keep moving’. While he presents this choice as being one about adapting Shakespeare to the comics medium, rather than the teenage audience, it also has implications for its readers.

By contrast the text of *No Fear* is adapted by the artist himself who chose not to use the plain English version from the side by side *No Fear Hamlet* edition, but redrafted it, as he explains, ‘by finessing the language and reverting the more understandable dialogue and famous lines to their original form’. By adding words or tweaking phrases he ‘tried to preserve the originality and flavor of Shakespeare’s diction, if not his poetic structure.’ (<http://neilcomics.com/hamlet/>) Occasionally, a word used in the text is asterisked and explained as a footnote, for example, ‘arras = tapestry’ or ‘nothing = in Shakespeare’s time, slang for female genitalia’ and references to mythology and texts are clarified (Babra 2008a, 55, 95, 66, 68). So while they take what appear to be radically different approaches to the script, both versions place emphasis on the original language. Whatever the stated intentions of the adaptors, however, these versions of *Hamlet* construct very different kinds of readers. In *Manga Shakespeare* the modernized aesthetic of the visual dimension might be seen to do the work of updating the text. Within this context, then, it is implied that the archaic language of the plays is made accessible. In *No Fear*, it is the language itself that is seen as the insurmountable barrier to understanding Shakespeare and requiring literal translation. So while this version might support a student in coming to ‘know’ *Hamlet* (its plot, characters, themes etc.) and hence Shakespeare’s ‘word’, it does not bring that student any closer to his ‘words’. In fact, it re-inscribes the strangeness of those words.

‘Movements of proximation’ – setting and characters

The *Manga Shakespeare* series adaptation of *Hamlet* relocates the play to the year 2107; the first page sets the scene for us, ‘Global climate change has devastated the Earth. This is now a cyberworld in constant dread of war’ (Vieceli and Appignanesi 2007, ii). Apart from the first few pages where the characters are introduced, the book is composed of black and white images drawn using manga style and conventions. The images ‘bleed’ right to the edge of the pages and are not contained within margins. The size and arrangement of panels is irregular and dynamic. The costumes the characters wear are appropriate to the futuristic setting, as are various technologies, for example, handprint sensitive door locks, retractable swords built into sleeves and letters that come in the form of microchip capsules. Hamlet is represented as a slim, darkly clad figure with a chiseled face and dyed, tousled hair. He often appears silhouetted in doorways, or leaning on windowsills with a long fringe falling on his face. His character is adapted to

the manga genre by placing it within a tradition of representing the 'bishonen' or beautiful boy. The artist explained,

I was a big fan of the 'angsty' protagonist..., the beautiful, tortured youth. And I thought, 'Jesus, Hamlet is the bishonen, he's the original. So this had to be played up...he just fitted that role, that tragi-comic hero so well. There's a page in it...when we were at a comics convention, if there were girls interested in buying it, I'd flick to that page and say, 'Well, you know...it's got this going on in here'. [She points to a section of the 'To be or not to be' speech showing Hamlet naked from the top up]. Seeing a bunch of girls squealing over Shakespeare is pretty cool.

The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is also given proportionately more space in this version than it occupies in the original. The artist said that she had deliberately tried to reinvigorate the character of Ophelia:

She's pretty much nothing; she's there so she can suffer and die. I just never really got her. But when I was drawing this I wanted to give her a little bit more of a character so...she listens to music a lot...and I made her a little bit more angry. I guess just in the expression.

These changes are carried out partly with the aim of making the character more appealing to a female teenage reader. She noted later on in the interview that many teenagers had copied the drawings of Ophelia, suggesting to her that they were able to identify with her. Another artist on the series told me:

They wanted to hit that market with something punchy that would appeal to teenagers. They wanted it to be futuristic or modern.

So while *Hamlet* is not set in *their* world (but in space) it is a world with which they are familiar through fiction, science fiction in this case. This unearths an assumption that, while teenagers might be able to relate to the fictional future, they are incapable of relating to the fictional past. This is reinforced by the decisions to include various technologies to help 'explain' or appeal to the teenage imagination. The updating of Ophelia is also an ideological correction based on a post-feminist world but the artist relies on visual cues to do this updating – Ophelia's 'expression' or the fact that she 'listens to lots of music' which is only discernible if you notice her ear implants. Here the visual mode is being used to comment on and alter aspects of the text but because the Shakespearean text remains 'true', it retains an authenticity as Shakespeare. The 'updating' relies on the visually literate teenager decoding the images.

In contrast, the *No Fear* graphic novel is less radical in its adaptation of character and setting. It similarly pictures Hamlet as enigmatic, young and slim, again with long forelocks that frequently tumble onto his face. The medieval castle setting is retained and used as a backdrop for many of the scenes depicted – gothic arches and winding stairs, turrets and enclosed cell-like spaces are frequently employed, lending the atmosphere a claustrophobic air. The artist works much more conventionally within the loose confines of a grid, adapting the shape and size of panels within the margin of the

pages. There are black plates that announce each act which bleed to the edge of the pages meaning that it is possible to locate these acts by thumbing through the edge of the book itself. Unlike the *Manga Shakespeare* version, the scenes and acts are identified for the reader and no scene is cut, including the Fortinbras sub-plot (unusually for *Hamlet* adaptations). In this sense the graphic novel is, as its author claims on his web site, the most ‘complete’ of any ‘stage or screen adaptation you’re likely to see, with the exception of Branagh’s director’s cut’ (Babra 2008b). The academic weight lost by replacing the language is therefore re-instated by both the ‘look’ and length of the text. Arguably then, it is the more ‘faithful’ of the two versions to a particular ideal of the Shakespearean text. Here, there are different assumptions about what might appeal to a young audience, and what they might be reading the text *for*. The idea that the reader needs to be close to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in terms of language, the world of the play (hence the recreation of the authentic setting) is important. While it moves away from Shakespeare’s ‘words’, it places emphasis on his ‘word’ in what might be regarded as an extreme way for an adaptation aimed at adolescents. Having discussed some of the general features of the texts, I will now turn to a more detailed analysis of the soliloquy before discussing them more fully within the context of multimodal and adaptation theories.

[Figure 1]

‘To be or not to be’ – two readings

In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* the ‘To be, or not to be’ soliloquy is made up of thirty-five lines of poetry and takes place in Act III scene 1 of the play. Polonius (Ophelia’s father and Chief Counsellor to the King) and Claudius (Hamlet’s uncle), intent on discovering the source of Hamlet’s supposed ‘madness’, have withdrawn to secretly observe a chance meeting they have engineered between Hamlet and Ophelia. Ophelia, therefore is present on stage when Hamlet enters and delivers his soliloquy, although he is not aware of her presence. Both versions acknowledge these details in setting up the soliloquy: in *Manga Shakespeare* there is a symmetrical image of Polonius and Ophelia looking over their shoulders as they hear Hamlet approach (Figure 1). These images are boxed off and the dark, brooding, faceless figure of Hamlet walks into the picture between these and straight towards the viewer. In the background we can see what looks like the peaks and troughs of an electrocardiogram trace perhaps indicating tension – the thudding heart of Ophelia, who looks apprehensive about her task. In the *No Fear*

version it is Claudius and Ophelia we see looking towards what we assume is Hamlet (Figure 2). In both cases Hamlet's entrance is communicated as a tense and important event for the characters, and for the reader who will probably be familiar with the first words of the soliloquy regardless of age and prior knowledge of the play itself. This is done, as I have indicated through visual cues and we could argue that because they place such weight on this speech, both artists replicate a culturally received valuing of this soliloquy. Both versions use two full pages of their book for this speech but (Figures 2, 3 and 4) they include different amounts of text. In the *Manga Shakespeare* version (Figure 4) the speech is placed into six consecutive text balloons that vary in shape and contour and are placed on or around images of Hamlet but do not extend from the mouth of the speaker. The *No Fear* artist, on the other hand, employs speech balloons which extend from Hamlet's mouth for the first line; he then dispenses with the extension, and then the balloons altogether, placing text around stark black and white images of Hamlet. Flicking through *Manga Hamlet*, it is striking how this double page spread is relatively uncluttered compared to others. The text of the original speech has been heavily edited but the first line ('To be, or not to be, that is the question') and the last phrase ('lose the name of action') are retained. Much of the complex imagery has been cut, however, what is left sums up the nub of the speech. The image of the split Hamlet and the sword attempts to illustrate the two paths Hamlet is considering and the decision to place words such as 'cowards', 'lose' and 'action' in bold could be emphasizing Hamlet's decision not to take his own life on this occasion.

[Figure 2 and 3 and 4]

No Fear's approach to adapting the speech (Figures 2 and 3) is different and, in tune with the rest of the book, attempts to keep much closer to the original text. While the language is modernized, it contains echoes of the original imagery and where these have been lost in translation, the artist attempts to reconstitute them in visuals instead. The first line of the soliloquy is split over two panels and Hamlet's face is bent downwards as if deep in thought. These thoughts are then visualized for the reader in subsequent panels. The artist also plays on the idea of a split but in his version this is pictured as a reflection. Hamlet, against the backdrop of a Gothic archway and a distant window, looks into a puddle that appears to reflect an image of his skeletal self back at him. The idea of taking his own life – envisaged in both versions as a literal representation of a sword - is placed into a separate panel. The speech is there in its entirety but in

modernized English; indeed the second page of this speech looks quite ‘text heavy’. When the artist has had to cut the imagery, he tends to reinstate it through his drawings. For example, ‘shuffled off this mortal coil’ becomes ‘once we have shed our natural bodies’ but the drawing is of a soul escaping from the unraveling coil of Hamlet’s body. The artist who worked on the *Manga Shakespeare Hamlet*, on the other hand, had this view on this particular image:

I think we all thought...that we were going to draw what was being alluded to because if you draw the metaphor, then you’re just presenting them with the same metaphor again. So they’d say, ‘Well, why is he in a coil?’

In each case, however, there is both a desire to keep Shakespeare’s ‘original’ imagery (either through words or images) *and* to translate that imagery for the reader. Both of these versions, whether drastically abbreviated or not, lend a pace to the events of the play which has the effect of ‘speeding it up’ for the reader. Even the soliloquies which might be seen as moments of contemplative stillness cannot help but have momentum in the comics medium.

The analysis above has focused on how script, setting, character, plot, and imagery have been adapted through processes such as abbreviation, temporal relocation, emphasis on aspects of plot or character, a speeding up of events and finally, and most obviously, ‘transductions’ from one mode to another. The target audience of teenagers has determined what the characters look like – in both versions and, as appropriate to their particular genre of comic book, Hamlet is ‘good looking’. On these grounds he is more likely to engage and less likely to bore. These are all ways of making the adolescent adapt to Hamlet, the character, and hence to *Hamlet*, the play. It is also about making Hamlet, the character and play, evolve and adapt to the times, to the contemporary audience. There has been some freedom, particularly in the *Manga Shakespeare* version, as to changes in geographical and temporal setting and textual redaction, but interestingly the *main* plot of the play remains sacrosanct. And yet, all the adaptors show through other decisions made that in their opinions there is more to ‘Shakespeare’ than story, and that this ‘more’ is worth knowing. So while he is updated to fit into the new context, he is also preserved through a different set of representational choices. There is a tension in this between the notion of a Shakespeare that is so universal that he is inherently adaptable, and a Shakespeare so essential and un-adaptable that he requires others to bring about these ‘strange alterations’ in order to make him fit. As Linda Hutcheon points out, the modes of engagement by both adaptor and audience are

important. The adaptors here have approached the source in a particular way which has been informed by the medium they wish to adapt it into, and the audience they are adapting it for. Similarly, the audience will approach the source differently depending on the medium they find it in. While the use of the ‘showing’ mode used in images and performance appeals to them viscerally and perceptually, it may leave less ‘cognitive’ work to do. This is the underlying assumption in the idea of educational accessibility, that pictures are somehow *less work* than words and that they will make Shakespeare who is ‘hard’ easier.

However, as multimodal theory has argued, all modes are equally complex and representing knowledge in these involves both ‘gains’ and ‘losses’. The multimodal nature of communication means that:

Each mode of communication interacts with and contributes to the other. At times the meanings realized in two modes may be equivalent, often they are complementary, sometimes one repeats information presented in the other. Additionally, each may refer to quite different aspects of meaning, or the two may be contradictory. (Kress et al. 2001, 14)

The comics medium works on exploiting the affordances of the modes of image and written text and their intersection. These modes can be complementary or contradictory but they cannot normally do the *same* work – if they did we would have illustrated text, not a comic book. As the close readings show, the comic artists are skilled at exploiting these affordances and intersections, however, when and where they chose one mode over another, is revealing. Quite often tone and emotion are represented visually, either through expression or the extensive visual grammar of manga that uses ‘chibis’ (hyper-cartoon style representations of characters) and other visual symbols to communicate emotional subtexts. It reveals their assumptions about what their audience can best grasp and how. However, there are occasions where they do replicate the same information in both modes. The best example, perhaps is in the first line of the soliloquy – ‘To be or not to be’. Both artists use these words, even the ‘modernized’ *No Fear* version, suggesting their inherent un-adaptability, and both show the reader exactly the same concept through images too. There is something about ‘Shakespeare’ and the burden of adapting him then that means both artists break an important principle of the comics medium.

Conclusion: adaptation and education

Earlier in this article I pointed to the potential limitations of an analytical approach based only in the study of text. Some of the early work in multimodality can perhaps be

criticised for this (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Kress, 2005). In this paper I suggested adaptation studies as an antidote to an overly text-based study, but it too has come under some criticism for the limitations of its methodologies which never quite escape the bounds of textual analysis (Murray, 2012). My own ‘close reading’ approach has reinforced, rather than moved away from, the text as the repository of meanings. I have ‘read’ the texts for the ways in which they position their implied readers and revealed some of the assumptions about those readers that are embedded in re-presenting Shakespeare. However, in doing so I have also highlighted the complexity of the adaptation process itself and have stressed the importance of investigating the values and assumptions inherent in these transactions further. Adaptation involves a network of relations between texts, concepts, modes and both producers and receivers of them. The premise behind what is adapted, how and why, needs to be further investigated in educational contexts - as does how these adaptations are actually received. Are the assumptions of producers (and teachers who use the adaptations) borne out or contradicted?

In the case outlined here there are several layers of adaptation taking place: Shakespeare’s text is adapted to an alternative text; Shakespeare is adapted to the comic form; the comic form is adapted within a genre (graphic novel or manga). As this intends to play itself out pedagogically, several other layers of ‘adaptation’ are also implied: the teenage audience’s adaptation to Shakespeare; Shakespeare to the contemporary teenage audience; the teacher to the student; the student to the teacher of Shakespeare. In all of this assumptions have been made about how the text will be read, in particular, what will be read as Shakespeare and what will be recognized as *adapted Shakespeare* which may, or may not, be true of students’ own experience. Indeed, ideas about what actually constitutes ‘Shakespeare’ have varied considerably. Finally, while the texts discussed here appeal to the supposed visual literacy of the younger generation and embrace what is also supposed to be that generation’s medium and aesthetic, they also reinstate Shakespeare as central to *being* ‘literate’. His authority (whether through plot or language) is never questioned and the texts themselves always point back to their source. This is despite that source’s status as a playscript for performance – an inherently adaptive, and arguably *unauthoritative*, art form. The production (and potentially, the use) of these adaptations trades on this transaction between youth culture and high culture, ‘street’ and school. As one of the artists I interviewed told me,

If I'd been able to say 'I read comics, yeah, but I read *Shakespeare* comics' that would have been cool.

Simone Murray has recently argued for a more sociological approach to the study of adaptation, one where texts are interesting

not so much for their intricate ideological encodings, but for the way they illuminate the contexts of their own production – a sphere in which competing ideologies are just as prevalent (2012, 5).

Such an approach is a doubly important one if we are considering the importance of producing, employing and receiving adapted texts within *educational* contexts. The adaptation of Shakespeare for teenagers presents a particularly interesting insight into such competing ideologies, and into the economic and cultural pressures of adapting. But it also highlights the ways in which culture is produced and packaged *for* young people, the way in which literacy is constructed through adapted texts and how different kinds of 'profit' (cultural, educational, symbolic and economic) circulate through such processes. This paper is the beginning of a discussion about exploring such issues through a range of methodological approaches, and in greater theoretical depth.

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¹ The phrase 'strange alteration' is taken from Act IV, scene v of *Coriolanus*. I use the term 'comic book' in the title and throughout the paper to refer to the *medium* of comics (sequential storytelling through word and image combinations) rather than specific *genres* of comic book e.g. manga, graphic novel, superhero etc.